

OPEN CONTENT

Time-to-Adoption Horizon: One Year or Less

The movement toward open content reflects a growing shift in the way academics in many parts of the world are conceptualizing education to a view that is more about the process of learning than the information conveyed in their courses. Information is everywhere; the challenge is to make effective use of it. Part of the appeal of open content is that it is also a response to both the rising costs of traditionally published resources and the lack of educational resources in some regions, and a cost-effective alternative to textbooks and other materials. As customizable educational content is made increasingly available for free over the Internet, students are learning not only the material, but also skills related to finding, evaluating, interpreting, and repurposing the resources they are studying in partnership with their teachers.

Overview

A new educational perspective, focused on collective knowledge and the sharing and reuse of learning and scholarly content, has been gaining ground across the globe for nearly a decade. Open content has now come to the point that it is rapidly driving change in both the materials we use and the process of education. At its core, the notion of open content is to take advantage of the Internet as a global dissemination platform for collective knowledge and wisdom, and to design learning experiences that maximize the use of it.

Open content, as described here, has its roots in a number of seminal efforts, including the Open Content Project, MIT's Open Courseware Initiative (OCW), the Open Knowledge Foundation, and work by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and others. Many of these projects focused on creating collections of sharable resources and on devising licenses and metadata schemata. The groundswell of interest in open content described here is differentiated from early work by its primary focus on the use of open content and its place in the curriculum. The role of open content producers has evolved as well, away from the idea of authoritative repositories of content and towards the broader notion of content being both free and ubiquitous. Building on the trailblazing models of institutions like MIT, schools like Tufts University (and many others) now consider making their course materials available to the public a social responsibility.

An outgrowth of that perspective is the emergence of open-content textbooks that can be “remixed” — that is, customized, modified, or combined with other materials — and a number of publishers are finding ways to support authors of such materials. One such publisher, Flat World Knowledge, provides access to textbooks authored for open use, making it very easy for faculty to individually tailor a text for use in their own class. Flat World Knowledge operates as a publisher, reviewing book submissions and using a traditional editing process before release; however, electronic copies of the textbooks are free. Students only pay for print copies, and authors receive royalties for these purchases whether the book has been customized or not.

At the center of many discussions of open content are the challenges of sharing, repurposing, and reusing scholarly works; related to those discussions are concerns about intellectual property, copyright, and student-to-student collaboration, and solid work has been done by groups such as Creative Commons, the Academic Commons, Science Commons, and others to address many of the concerns commonly voiced. Many believe that reward structures that support the sharing of work in progress, ongoing research, highly collaborative projects, and a broad view of what constitutes scholarly publication are key challenges that institutions need to solve. Also to be addressed are reputation systems, peer review processes, and new models for citation of the new

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forms of content that are likely outgrowths of open content initiatives.

While a number of highly structured projects exist to provide access to open content, in general, the open content community is diffuse and distributed; learning to find useful resources within a given discipline, assess the quality of content available, and repurpose them in support of a learning or research objective are in and of themselves valuable skills for any emerging scholar, and many adherents of open content list that aspect among the reasons they support the use of shareable materials.

Relevance for Teaching, Learning, or Creative Inquiry

Open content shifts the learning equation in a number of interesting ways; the most important is that its use promotes a set of skills that are critical in maintaining currency in any discipline — the ability to find, evaluate, and put new information to use. Almost as important is that the same set of materials, once placed online and made sharable via the appropriate licensing, can inform a wide variety of learning modalities, not the least of which is learning for the sheer joy of discovery.

Communities of practice and learning communities have formed around open content in a great many disciplines, and provide practitioners and independent learners alike an avenue for continuing education. OpenLearn (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk>), a project of the Open University in the U.K., offers anyone the opportunity to join a study group while working through their open course content. OpenLearn practices a method known as “supported open learning,” in which students work through content at their own pace with help and guidance from a tutor. Faculty communities of practice are flourishing as well; at Trinity University, for example, faculty endorsed an Open Access policy that enables them to place copies of their scholarly works in an open-access repository shared by several liberal arts colleges.

Many sources of open content can easily be found in Creative Commons (<http://creativecommons.org>),

Teachers Without Borders (<http://www.teacherswithoutborders.org>), and other online communities, while portals like Folksemantic (<http://www.folksemantic.com>) offer a single point of entry to many open content offerings. Learning communities associated with services like Diigo or Twine can point educators in the right direction via the social networking equivalent of “word of mouth.”

A sampling of other open content projects across disciplines includes the following:

- **Art History.** Smarthistory, an open educational resource dedicated to the study of art, seeks to replace traditional art history textbooks with an interactive, well-organized website. Search by time period, style, or artist (<http://smarthistory.org>).
- **Graduate Studies.** The Tokyo Institute of Technology offers 35 graduate level courses, open and free of charge, in the schools of science and engineering, bioscience and biotechnology, innovation management, and others.
- **Health Sciences.** The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health provides open-access classes to further the goal of improving global understanding of health-related issues. Courses include the school’s most popular subjects, including adolescent health, infectious disease, genetics, and aging.
- **Literature.** *Looking for Whitman* (<http://looking-forwhitman.org>) is an open-access, multi-institutional experiment, dedicated to the study of the life and works of Walt Whitman.

Open Content in Practice

The following links provide examples of open content.

American Literature before 1860

<http://enh241.wetpaint.com>

Students in this course, held at Mesa Community College, contribute to the open course material as part of their research. MCC also features a number of lectures on YouTube (see <http://www.youtube.com/user/mesacc#p/p>).

Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative

<http://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning>

The Open Learning Initiative offers instructor-led and self-paced courses; any instructor may teach with the materials, regardless of affiliation. In addition, the courses include student assessment and intelligent tutoring capability.

Connexions

<http://cnx.org>

Connexions offers small modules of information and encourages users to piece together these chunks to meet their individual needs.

eScholarship: University of California

http://escholarship.org/about_escholarship.html

eScholarship provides peer review and publishing for scholarly articles, books, and papers, using an open content model. The service also includes tools for dissemination and research.

MIT OpenCourseWare

<http://ocw.mit.edu>

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology publishes lectures and materials from most of its undergraduate and graduate courses online, where they are freely available for self-study.

Open.Michigan's dScribe Project

<https://open.umich.edu/projects/oer.php>

The University of Michigan's Open.Michigan initiative houses several open content projects. One, dScribe, is a student-centered approach to creating open content. Students work with faculty to select and vet resources, easing the staffing and cost burden of content creation while involving the students in developing materials for themselves and their peers.

OTTER

<http://www.le.ac.uk/otter>

The University of Leicester's OTTER project (Open, Transferable and Technology-enabled Educational Resources) pilots and evaluates systems for releasing educational content under an open license.

For Further Reading

The following articles and resources are recommended for those who wish to learn more about open content.

Center for Social Media Publishes New Code of Best Practices in OCW

<http://criticalcommons.org/blog/content/center-for-social-media-publishes-new-code-of-best-practices-in-ocw>

(Critical Commons, 25 October 2009.) The advocacy group Critical Commons seeks to promote the use of media in open educational resources. Their *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Open-CourseWare* is a guide for content developers who want to include fair-use material in their offerings.

Countries Offer Different Takes to Open Online Learning

<http://chronicle.com/article/Countries-Offer-Different/48775>

(Simmi Aujla and Ben Terris, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 October 2009.) Many countries are using open educational resources to reach students who would otherwise be unable to attend university.

Creative Commons

<http://www.creativecommons.org>

Creative Commons has created a set of legal tools consistent with the rules of copyright that make it not only possible but easy for people to share and build upon the work of others. The organization provides free licenses that allow anyone to create, share, and use open content.

Flat World Knowledge: A Disruptive Business Model

<http://industry.bnet.com/media/10003790/flat-world-knowledge-a-disruptive-business-model>

(David Weir, *BNET*, 20 August 2009.) Flat World Knowledge is enjoying rapid growth, from 1,000 students in the spring of 2009 to 40,000 in the fall semester using their materials. The company's business model pays a higher royalty percentage to textbook authors and charges students a great deal less than traditional publishers.

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Open Content and the Emerging Global Meta-University

<http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume41/OpenContentandtheEmergingGlobal/158053>

In this article drawn from his 2005 Clair Maple Memorial Address at the Seminars on Academic Computing, MIT President Emeritus Charles Vest discusses open content and outlines the promise and opportunity that drove the creation of MIT OpenCourseWare.

Delicious: Open Content

<http://delicious.com/tag/hz10+opened>

Follow this link to find additional resources tagged for this topic and this edition of the *Horizon Report*. To add to this list, simply tag resources with “hz10” and “opened” when you save them to *Delicious*.